

I Better Read Between the Lines by [osaki_nana_707](#)

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Summary:

Steve makes good on his promise to drive Billy and the girls into the city for a day of fun. He maybe should have asked Billy what his idea of fun actually was before picking ice skating, but it works out. Mostly.

I Better Read Between the Lines

Author's Note:

please read the other stories before this or it may not make sense! thanks!

• I Better Read Between the Lines

Steve's trying to decide between two shirts.

It's pretty stupid, he knows. There's no reason for the dilemma because, honestly, the shirts are pretty similar. One is striped, and one is just red, but they're cut the same way on his frame. Even if they weren't, there's no point in even *worrying* about what he wears because it's just a day trip into the city with Hannah and the Hargroves. It's not like how he *looks* even *matters*, and he's not going to look good in anything because he looks like a fucking dweeb in these *glasses*—

Okay, so he's a little insecure about it.

No one has said Steve looks *bad* in the glasses, no one except the voice in Steve's head. He'd picked a pair that was as inconspicuous as possible and tried not to dwell on how old it made him feel that his vision was going bad. It was just *difficult* when the only other dad his age that he'd been spending time around was Billy-fucking-Hargrove and he still looked like... like...

He decides it's best not to finish that train of thought.

God knows he's thought about Billy enough these last few weeks as it is. It *is* Billy's fault, of course, since Billy was the one to kiss him in the Camaro on Parents' Day. It had all started with that moment, that good fucking kiss from that asshole, that good-looking asshole... and then Dustin had had to go and be so *certain* that Steve wanted to *bang* him and he *doesn't*, okay? He *doesn't*!

"Daddy," Hannah groans from where she's belly-flopped on his bed,

kicking her legs dramatically. She's already dressed and ready to go. Steve's even done her hair for her.

Steve concedes, shoving his hands into the back pockets of his jeans as he looks over at her. "Which one do you like? I wanna look my best if I'm gonna be with my best girl."

Hannah grins, rolling onto her back. "I like the red one."

Steve picks the red one.

The two of them hop into the car and Steve makes the short drive over to Billy's place. Steve hasn't even turned off the ignition before the front door is flying open and Katie is running out, full of the same boundless energy she usually has. An attempt was made to braid her hair, it looks like, but only one side of it is finished, and it's not even done well. Billy follows after her out the door, still in his sweat-pants and hair-tie around his wrist, looking a little like he wants to pout.

"I wasn't done, Katie," he offers uselessly. She's not listening. Hannah's gotten out of the car and they're coming up with all of the things they're absolutely going to do today (things that Steve is certain are *not* on his agenda). Steve's barely listening himself because fuck, he hasn't seen Billy since the night he went to pick up Hannah and it all comes rushing back to him at once. The close contact, the way Billy's eyes had dipped towards his mouth, the way Steve had thought they *might*—but no, it was just Dustin's words getting in his head—but if it *wasn't*... and then Steve had promptly chickened out before he could know for sure. In the daylight he feels the familiar burn of shame tint his cheeks for a moment.

"You gonna wear that?" Steve asks as he gets out of the car, grinning, trying to hide his embarrassment by throwing a gentle barb in his direction. It's how they operate.

"Piss off," Billy replies, but there's not as much heat in it as usual. He looks tired, and he's still a little fidgety. Steve guesses he hasn't quite kicked the urge for a cigarette even now. Ah, fuck, Steve already knows the smile tugging at his lips is way too fond.

Together the two of them manage to corral the girls into the house,

and Steve watches while Billy sits down on the fold-out that hasn't been put away and lets Katie settle in front of him while he starts braiding the other half of her hair. Cartoons are playing on the television and the place is kind of a mess. Steve's urge for control makes him want to start tidying, and suddenly *he's* the fidgety one.

Katie's fidgety too, but mostly because she's got too much energy, and it explains the messiness of the first braid. Billy grabs her around the waist and tells her to 'chill' and she does, but she never stops talking. Hannah stands at the foot of the bed, listening.

Steve knows he should sit. He needs to sit down so he doesn't start cleaning but there's nowhere to sit except...

He sits down on the other side of the bed.

Billy's hands freeze mid-plait. He doesn't look at Steve, in fact seems to be putting a *lot* of effort into not looking at him. Steve almost wants to toe his shoes off and lay back, just to see what he'd do, but he doesn't. Maybe next time.

"So," Billy says, clearing his throat, "where exactly are we going?"

"Just a couple of hours into the city," Steve says, turning his gaze to the girls. "Thought we could get lunch and go ice skating."

Both of the girls' faces brighten. Hannah hasn't been ice skating since they moved to Hawkins. It's immediately clear from Katie's expression that she's never been *at all*.

Billy's slightly pale, hesitant expression shows he hasn't been either... but at least with him, Steve's gotten into the habit of poking the bear. He really should know better, but maybe he's just a glutton for punishment.

"You ever been?" Steve asks, even though he knows the answer. Billy can probably see he knows the answer in the smugness all over his face.

"No," Billy says defensively, "but how hard can it be?"

Steve shrugs and doesn't answer. "Dustin'll be there too."

Billy's eyes narrow, but Hannah squeals in delight because Dustin is her Favorite.

"The curly-haired kid?" Billy scoffs, going for annoyed but only managing uncomfortable.

"He's not a kid anymore, Billy. He's in his twenties."

"Why is he coming? I thought this was just gonna be the four of us."

"Well, I figured you didn't know how to skate, so it's better to have a couple of people there who do because someone's going to have to help Katie, and someone's going to have to help you."

"I don't need any fucking help."

"Dad," Katie says. "We're not allowed to say fucking anymore."

"No, *you're* not allowed to say it. I can still say it."

"*Why?*" Katie complains, and Billy relents immediately because it really doesn't need to turn into a tantrum.

"Okay, fine, I won't say it."

There it is again. That fond smile. Steve just can't help himself.

"I told him about you," Steve admits. "I told him you'd changed. He wants to see for himself."

Billy looks at him, swallows. He looks like he wants to say something. He looks like he wants to throw up. He looks like he is relatively certain Dustin won't see any difference, and Steve just *aches*.

"I think he'll be impressed," Steve says.

Billy looks away, and Steve pretends he doesn't see the blush that spreads across Billy's face. "It's not like I care what some kid thinks about me anyway."

"What about me?" Katie asks.

"You're not 'some kid'. You're *my* kid."

Katie smiles, satisfied. Steve is satisfied too.

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Lunch is a quick-ish affair at a McDonald's where the food is basically inhaled by Katie and Hannah so that they can spend the rest of their time in the tubes and slides of the playground. Billy sits across from Steve, munching slowly on his fries, very much continuing to *not* look at him, and it makes Steve a little crazy.

Billy was silent most of the drive down, which was easier because Hannah and Katie were there to fill it up, but now it's so obvious. Steve thinks of the phone call they'd had when he'd asked Billy to watch Hannah last week, how easy that had been. Then, the moment that night had happened and... now things are *weird*.

"So," Steve tries, and he finds he's suddenly very interested in his food too, "how is the not smoking going?"

Billy exhales slowly, like it's so hard to breathe out. "It fucking sucks," he says because Katie's not there to tell him he can't say 'fucking'. "I thought it'd get easier, but it hasn't."

"Yeah," Steve says, "Life's like that sometimes."

Billy's mouth quirks with the touch of a smile. Steve thinks it's a good look on him, but he keeps the thought to himself.

He waits.

Like clockwork, Billy starts talking. "Beth called me," he says. Steve doesn't know who Beth is, but Billy doesn't leave him wondering long. "Katie's mom. I don't even know how she got my number, but she called me at like... two a.m."

"And?" Steve presses slowly. He doesn't know why his heart is suddenly pounding.

"She was... fucked up," Billy sighs, scrubbing his hands over his face. "I'd heard she got out of rehab, but I know what she sounds like when she's on something."

Steve's heart sinks. For Billy. For Katie. "What happened?"

"She keeps demanding me to let her see Katie, telling me it's her right as a mother or whatever. I start arguing with her, telling her she forfeited those rights when she got fucked up and went to prison and I've got the paperwork to fucking prove it, and she wasn't listening to me and... I dunno, I got pissed. I started screaming at her. I just started screaming into the fucking phone like a stupid asshole. I woke Katie up. She knew who I was talking to."

He lays his head down on the table, like he's ashamed that she knows that, because it was at an ungodly hour and that Billy was screaming, it must be her mother. Steve realizes the tiredness he'd seen on Billy earlier isn't just from the nicotine withdrawal.

He waits again. Billy's hands slide through his hair, and he sighs and sits back up. He looks instantly even more exhausted. "They both start crying because they want to talk to each other, and I hang up the phone. Katie... throws one of her fits, and I... I tried to do it your way. I tried to talk her down."

"Did it work?" Steve asks, feeling weirdly breathless.

"I dunno. I guess," Billy says, unconfident. "It took like two hours."

Steve looks over at the playground and then back at Billy. He reaches out and just briefly touches his hand, just briefly squeezes it. "Tell me what happened."

Billy looks at their hands, their hands that are no longer touching. He swallows. "I... told her she couldn't talk to her mom because her mom was sick," he says slowly. "She... just kept crying, kept saying 'she's always sick'. I told her I was sorry, and she said I was lying. She just... *screamed*. She was so *loud*, man... I wanted to just put her in her room until she calmed down, but I held onto her, and I just kept saying I was sorry until she stopped."

He pulls his hands in, arms folding at the end of the table before Steve can reach out and touch him again.

"It's fucked up," Billy says. "I get so pissed off. I wanna be enough for

her on my own. I want her to not give a shit about Beth. *I* want to not give a shit about Beth. It's supposed to be... normal. Like, that bullshit you see on TV. A mom and a dad and a kid, and we fake happy until she goes off to college. It's not supposed to be like this."

Billy starts chewing on what's left of his nails. They're all bitten down to the quick.

Steve wants to say something. He *should* say something.

He doesn't.

--

Dustin's waiting outside the rink when Steve pulls up. He's wearing his school sweatshirt, a baseball cap, and a pair of Ray Bans. He looks at Billy suspiciously when he gets out of the car, and he's not even remotely subtle about it.

"Mr. Dustin!" Hannah cries out, bolting to him. His Very Serious Expression melts away as soon as she wraps her little arms around his legs.

"Hannah-Banana!" Dustin exclaims, picking her up and spinning her around. Steve grins, lighter at the sound of her giggling and pops the trunk, pulling out his black figure skates and Hannah's little white ones. Billy's suddenly next to him at his trunk, and he looks surprised. Steve at first thinks it's because he didn't expect Steve to own his own pair of skates, but then he realizes there's a nail bat in the trunk of his car.

"That's uh... somethin'," Billy says, raising his eyebrows.

"Yep," Steve says, then shuts the trunk quickly, making it clear he doesn't want to talk about it.

"Remind me to never piss you off," is all Billy says, grinning, tongue pressed between his teeth.

"What are you talking about? You piss me off all the time," Steve teases back. Billy's smile widens and Steve's heart skips a beat.

Billy doesn't notice, of course, but Dustin definitely does. Steve can see him watching the two of them over the rim of his sunglasses. Steve stares back at him, silently communicating that he should shut the fuck up even though he hasn't said anything.

Katie takes the steps two at a time so that she can join Dustin and Hannah. Dustin's suspicious expression softens again at the sight of her. He's always a sucker for kids, and Hannah's been talking his ear off about her since she got picked up.

"So, you're Katie, hm?" Dustin says.

Katie nods, staring up at him without an ounce of fear. Dustin actually seems a little intimidated by her. Steve thinks he kind of has a right to be.

"I like your braids," Dustin says, just a touch nervous.

"I like your sunglasses," Katie replies.

Dustin straight up gives her the sunglasses, like she asked him for them.

"Don't worry, kid," Billy says, smacking Dustin on the shoulder as he passes. "She has that effect on people."

"I'm not a kid," Dustin mumbles, and they all go inside.

Steve pays for everyone, including rental skates for Katie, Billy, and Dustin. The place isn't too crowded, which he's grateful for. The chill from the ice clears the fog in Steve's head, and he breathes it in as he sits and takes off his tennis shoes. A few moments later Dustin flops down on one side of him, and Billy sits on the other. The two girls are on the floor in front of them, tugging on their own skates. Dustin and Katie both have gone for the figure skate rentals, but Billy's gone with the hockey skates.

Dustin looks at Steve and then at Billy. Steve can't give him The Look in time before he says, "So uh... it's been a while, huh, Billy?"

"Little bit," Billy says, then, "Katie, let me lace your skates."

She holds her feet up and Billy rolls his eyes fondly, taking them into his lap so he can lace them.

“Lace them tight,” Steve instructs.

“What are you, my mom? I know how to tie shoes,” Billy grumbles.

“It’s different though,” Steve says. Hannah squeezes in between Dustin and Steve, laying her feet across Steve’s lap. He ties her skates for her with ease. He grins to himself as he sees Billy watching how he does it out of the corner of his eye.

“How’s that feel?” Steve asks Hannah when he’s done.

“It’s good,” she says, hopping to her feet and making a dash for the door to the ice. Katie is right behind her, hobbling along a little more unshurely.

Billy is instantly watching her like a hawk, shoulders stiffening and lips thinning into a line. He’s getting to his feet, but Steve pulls him back down. “You can’t go out there with your skates untied.”

“I got her, no worries,” Dustin says, getting to his feet. Steve looks up at him. Billy does too. Dustin shrugs, then marches off to the door where Katie is still standing. Hannah’s already on the ice, soaring around like she was just there yesterday. Steve smiles as he watches. She couldn’t get enough of this place when they lived in the city.

Dustin looks back at the two of them, then at Katie, and he holds out his hand. “Don’t worry, Katie. I got you.”

“Who’s got you?” she asks, and she grins.

“Isn’t it obvious? You do,” Dustin says, putting on his most charming smile as he holds out his hand. She takes it and wobbles out onto the ice with Dustin helping to keep her up.

Steve turns his gaze back on Billy, but his nerves haven’t subsided just because Katie is safe. He nudges Billy with his elbow and jokes, “You want me to hold your hand out there?”

Billy sits a little straighter, indignant, color rising on his cheeks.

Steve shrugs and gets up. "Suit yourself," he says and glides out onto the ice effortlessly. He joins Hannah going clockwise around the rink, smiling at her as she soars along, content. He feels lighter here, away from everything that hangs on him. The cold numbs him to the memories of his youth that still haunt him, and breathing is easier. For a moment he can pretend he can outrun the nightmares and the disappointment in himself and the confusing feelings.

He turns around, skates backwards. Dustin's tugging Katie along. She's nervous but getting the hang of it, looks like, and she's definitely having fun if the smile on her face is any indication. Leave it to her to be fucking fearless.

Billy is... less fearless.

Steve finds him still by the door, holding to the wall like a desperate man clinging to life. He's pretty sure that, from Billy's point of view, this is an accurate description of what's happening. Steve has to press his lips together to keep from laughing and finishes his lap around the rink before gliding up next to Billy who's moved maybe two feet total.

"You alright?" Steve asks.

"Piss off," Billy says, and it's meaner than the one earlier that day, fueled by fear. "What the fuck, Steve?"

Steve can't help himself. He laughs.

"I should kick your ass," Billy growls.

"You'd have to catch me," Steve says delightedly, continuing to casually skate backwards just out of Billy's reach (not that it looks like he has any intention of letting go of the wall).

Billy sneers. "What the fuck is this? Is this what the yokels in Indiana do in their free time?"

"Pretty much," Steve says lightly. "Relax, Billy. It's supposed to be fun."

"I'm *fine*," Billy says, sounding very much not fine.

"If you say so," Steve says. He moves out to center ice and leaves Billy to commiserate with the wall. Steve is nowhere near a professional skater, but his parents had let him take lessons for a bit when he was a kid and they needed somewhere to put him for a while, so he's decent. Rusty, but decent. So, of course, he's gotta show off a little bit. He can do a couple of easy jumps, and he can spin, so he does a few of each. They're playing a bunch of pop hits over the loud speaker, and Steve pretends it doesn't bother him that he doesn't *quite* recognize them. It's not because he's getting older and out of touch, okay? It's just that his car is really the only place he listens to music and it's been exclusively the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack for months.

"Never thought I'd see Billy Hargrove look so scared."

Steve glances over his shoulder to find Dustin skating over to him. It appears Katie's achieved enough confidence to get Hannah's help instead. Hannah's tugging her around the rink by the arms. Steve calls out across the rink for them to be careful then glances back over to Billy who has ceased moving entirely and is uncomfortably letting other wall-grabbers paw at his arms and shirt as they pass him while he tries (and fails) to look casual about it.

"I feel bad," Steve sighs.

"I don't," Dustin laughs. "I mean, honestly, Steve, this is the dream. It's pretty hilarious. I wish Max was here to witness it."

"I want *everyone* to have a good time, Dustin, him included. I know you still don't like him, but..."

"No, I mean... he does seem... *different* from the last time I saw him," Dustin offers. "He definitely doesn't seem as pissed off, at least. Also, he's shorter than I remember... *However*..." He meets Steve's gaze, holding up one finger to prove how Serious and Important his next statement is, "I still don't trust him. Just because he's calm right now doesn't mean he can't be set off like a bomb. Dressing nice doesn't mean he is nice."

"He didn't dress nice," Steve scoffs, but then he looks at Billy again in his button-down and leather jacket, at the non-hole denim on his

legs and the way he clearly did put some product in his curls, and he thinks about how long it took Billy to come out of the bathroom after he finished doing Katie's hair that morning. Maybe he did dress up a little bit. When he looks back at Dustin, Dustin is looking so tired, like Steve is exhausting to deal with and not the other way around.

"Whatever," Dustin says. "Maybe he always dresses like that, I don't know. I mean, is it a little much for an ice skating rink and fast food? I think so, but that's my opinion. Considering you probably spent all morning picking out that shirt he probably took the idea from you, but I don't know."

Dustin is talking more to the air than to Steve, but Steve still feels a little called out. He definitely doesn't confirm Dustin's suspicions, that's for sure.

"We're dressed like adults, Dustin, that's all," Steve says instead, and he at least sounds convincing enough that Dustin doesn't argue.

"I'm just saying," he says, "how am I supposed to know he's not the same ticking timebomb underneath the nice outfit?"

"You haven't spent any time with him, but I have," Steve says. "He's not raging anymore. He's learning how to deal with it. For Katie's sake."

They both look at the little girls again. They're skating by Billy, and Katie's smiling at him. She exclaims, "Look at me, Dad!"

That's when Dustin sees it. Steve knows this because Steve sees it too.

Billy *softens* like ice cream left out on the counter, all of his nerves sloughing off of his shoulders. The smile that spreads across his face is not the predatory one from his high school days that was full of teeth and malice. It's gentler and makes him look younger, like the boy he surely must have been before the anger took up all of the empty spaces that had been carved out inside of him. Steve can't help but think about how young they both were back then—young and stupid and full of bad decisions, running full speed ahead with the only fuel to their fire being what was on hand. Billy's run out of anger to use for the most part, but Steve's not out of his attempts to

be the hero just yet.

He only gives Dustin's slightly slack-jawed expression a casual glance before he skates back over to Billy and holds out his hand. "Come on," he says. "You gotta keep up with her, right? She's showing you up right now, Hargrove."

"She does that every day of my life," Billy says, but he actually takes Steve's hand and lets him help him off the wall. Of course, it wouldn't be Billy if he didn't have some kind of insult to shield his soft edges a bit. "We can't all be ice princesses like you, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah," Steve says, dragging Billy out further. His hands are warmer than Steve expected considering Billy didn't wear gloves. Steve can feel the heat radiating into his own gloves, and he weirdly wishes he wasn't wearing them either. He has a brief, white-hot flash of desire for the skin-on-skin contact, to know the shape of Billy's hands intimately. He hopes that the redness in his face can be blamed on the chill of the rink. "Keep talking and I'll drop your ass."

"You're bluffing," Billy says, grinning. "You've been trying to get your hands on me all day. You're not going to stop now."

"I've got you completely at my mercy, Hargrove. I can absolutely use it to my advantage," Steve grins right back and *oh God*, they're flirting. Steve's always been kind of slow to realize he's being flirted with, but they are absolutely *flirting*. It makes his heart flutter a little in panic because a) they're in public, and b) he's relatively certain the only one slower at realizing they're being flirted with than him is Billy because Billy seems to have no idea.

He looks at Dustin who's halfway across the rink. He can't hear what they're saying, Steve knows, but his eyebrows are inching towards his hairline anyway.

Steve has to recover this before it gets weird. *Again*.

"You really suck at this," he jokes, and thankfully Billy's annoyed expression isn't severe enough to warrant any fear that he's about to get his ass kicked.

"I'd like to see you try to surf, pretty boy. That is, if you can even make it to the water before you're sunburned."

"Hey," Steve grumbles, but honestly it's kind of true. Steve can remember many a summer camp afternoon spent with the counselor rubbing aloe over his stinging red skin. It doesn't seem to matter how often he reapplies his sunscreen, he always ends up burned.

He thinks that might be the same way he's been thinking about Billy—approaching things carefully, certain he's going to get hurt regardless.

Everyone leaves eventually.

A new song starts playing over the loudspeaker. "*I gotta take a little time, a little time to think things over...*"

Steve's toe-pick catches in the ice while he's not paying attention, and Billy has to catch him since Steve is the only thing keeping him upright. Their chests collide, and Steve is briefly caught up in the scent of Billy's cologne—an earthy, spicy smell that makes him a little dizzy—and then he's straightening up. If Billy were a woman, if Steve wasn't terrified to ruin the tentative friendship he already had and destroy not only his own happiness but Hannah's too, he thinks he would have made a joke about falling for him.

"In my life there's been heartache and pain... I don't know if I can face it again..."

Steve stares into his eyes and he thinks that maybe jokes aren't very funny when they might be true.

"You tryin' to kill me?" Billy asks, looking a little petrified that he's still going to fall even though he's perfectly steady now. It loosens the tension in Steve's chest a little bit.

"I told you, I have you at my mercy," Steve says. "I did that on purpose. I had it completely under control."

"You're a shitty liar, Steve."

Steve laughs and is grateful it's only hysteric inside his head.

"I wanna know what love is! I want you to show me!" echoes Lou Gramm's voice throughout the rink, and Billy looks up at the speaker miserably.

"Good God," Billy mumbles under his breath, "you've got to be kidding me."

"What? You don't like Foreigner?" Steve asks, smirking.

Billy... hesitates. Just a beat too long. Like what he says isn't what he's thinking about at all. "Uh, duh, Foreigner fucking sucks."

"You can't say fucking!"

Katie and Hannah have made another lap around the rink in the time they've been standing there *holding each other*.

"No, *you* can't!" Billy shouts after her.

Dustin is *wheezing* as he glides by because he's laughing so hard. Billy looks flustered, and Steve thinks it's unfair to be cute when embarrassed.

"Piss off, Henderson," Billy says, makes a step forward like he's going to go after him, and... proceeds to completely fucking faceplant onto the ice and take Steve down with him.

Steve rolls onto his back and stares up at the ceiling of the rink and just starts *cackling*. The nervous energy he constantly has inside of him has nowhere else to go when it's knocked out of him, so all he can do is laugh it out. He supposes it's better than the alternative of screaming.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up," Billy complains. "Aren't you supposed to be the professional here?"

"I'm not a professional, and you're the asshole that fell."

"You can't say asshole," Billy says, grinning.

"No, *you* can't," Steve counters, and good God, he's fucked. He's so fucked. Dustin's right and Steve wants to bang him and he's a stupid

asshole, and he's so fucking fucked. He doesn't know why he always does this to himself, doesn't know why he never learns.

All he does know is that he's got to get it under control, and for the love of God, *can't* let anyone find out about this.

He's not sure what he'd do if he lost Billy now, so he'll keep his feelings to himself.

Surely, this'll blow over eventually.

Surely.

Author's Note:

i'm on [tumblr](#).